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ABSTRACT

In view of the many definitions and goals of general education found in the literature, it can be concluded that there is a lack of agreement on what is and what should be included in general education. A number of dominant forces in American colleges and universities have been responsible, in very large part, for the difficulties of community college general education. These include the reluctance of four-year institutions to accept general education transfer credits, the fact that research has assumed greater importance than teaching, and that professional and vocational programs have been structured to permit little, if any, opportunity for student participation in general education. Internally, community colleges have been too concerned with establishing an identity and in so doing have structured departments based on disciplines patterned on existing systems in four-year institutions, rather than putting their full innovative energy and interest into meeting the demands of general education students. To be a comprehensive education unit, the community college must not only retain the function of general education, but must also regain the confidence of the public in its ability to do so. The process of providing general education is complex--an institution must have stated goals and be devoted to the task, instructors must be found who are willing and able to teach, and students must find that it is relevant and worthwhile to learn. (MB)

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GENERAL EDUCATION: REFRAIN OR RETAIN

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POSITION PAPER

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GENERAL EDUCATION: REFRAIN OR RETAIN

The purpose of this paper is to take a position on the question "Should community colleges refrain from or retain the general education function?" Roughly speaking, the purpose of general education is defined in terms of the fullest personal development of each student.

It is difficult, and nearly impossible, to give a precise definition of general education. Dr. Aston R. Williams, Director of the Natal College for Advanced Technical Education in Durban, South Africa, visited the United States to view firsthand our efforts in general education. After an extensive tour of colleges and universities, he was asked to define general education in the United States. He skirted the task as follows: "to say what general education does mean in the United States is not possible, because of the many variations in practice; to say what general education should mean in the United States would be presumptuous on the part of an observer from a distant country."[1]

Charles R. Monroe suggests "general education is that part of the college curriculum which is deemed essential for the education of all students and, therefore, should be required for graduation."[2] Many definitions of general education can be given. The following statements contain definitions found in the literature which convey the goals of general education frequently associated with the community college.

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[1]Aston R. Williams, General Education in Higher Education (New York: Teachers College Press of Columbia University Press, 1968), pp. 215-16.

[2]Charles R. Monroe, Profile of the Community College (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1972), p. 67.

C. H. Faust's description of the goals of the University of Chicago plan for general education and a second definition on general education by Thornton are:

> General education appears...to be the preparation of youth to deal with the personal and social problems with which all men in a democratic society are confronted.... General education must undertake, therefore, to prepare people to think for themselves.[3]

> General education refers to programs of education specifically designed to afford young people more effective preparation for the responsibilities which they share in common as citizens in a free society and for wholesome and creative participation in a wide range of life activities.[4]

General education has also been defined as a set of:

> ...experiences and opportunities for learning that tend to optimize simultaneously the breadth, integration, and fruitfulness of an individual's knowledge, experiences, emotions, motives, and related mental phenomena within the limits and circumstances provided by his own intellectual and developmental potentials, the surrounding society, and the non-human environment.[5]

In yet another description, Horace T. Morse, Dean of the General College, University of Minnesota, summarized by saying general education:

> ...is more concerned with the learner than with the content, which may be organized or reshuffled with less regard to traditional fields. Its goals are individual development in its various aspects, and it places emphasis upon behavior and social usefulness as well as upon intellectual development as an outcome of learning. It is a manifestation of the democratic spirit in higher education, for it admits a wider scope of abilities and a far broader clientele.[6]

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[3]C. H. Faust, Ideas and Practice of General Education (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), p. 6.

[4]James W. Thornton, Jr., "General Education in the Public Junior College," The Public Junior College, Fifty-fifth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, ed. Nelson B. Henry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 118.

[5]David Horton Smith, "Defining General Education: Relativity, Breadth, Integration, Fruitfulness, and Individuality," The Journal of General Education, XXII (October, 1970), 161.

[6]Horace T. Morse, "Liberal and General Education: A Problem of Differentiation," General Education Current Ideas and Concerns, ed. James G. Rice (Washington: Association for Higher Education National Education Association, 1964), p. 11.

The following is an example of a catalog description of a general education curricula at Platte Technical Community College in Columbus, Nebraska which is intended for all students:

> ...The general education courses are designed to provide competence and understanding needed by citizens in a free society, as well as creative participation in a wide range of activities. The goals of the general education courses include the development of values and critical abilities, the skill of communications with others, and understanding of life processes.[7]

In the related literature on general education one of the better breakdowns of the goals emphasized in the previous definitions is found in the 1947 Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education. It states that the goals of general education are:

> (1) to develop for the regulation of one's personal and civic life a code of behavior based on ethical principles consistent with democratic ideals, (2) to participate actively as an informed and responsible citizen in solving the social, economic, and political problems of one's community, state, and nation, (3) to recognize the interdependence of the different peoples of the world and one's personal responsibility for fostering international understanding and peace, (4) to understand the common phenomena in our physical envieonment, to apply habits of scientific thought to both personal and civic problems, and to appreciate the implications of scientific discoveries for human welfare, (5) to understand the ideas of others and to express one's own effectively, (6) to attain a satisfactory emotional and social adjustment, (7) to maintain and improve his own health and to cooperate actively and intelligently in solving community health problems, (8) to understand and enjoy literature, art, music, and other cultural activities as expressions of personal and social experience, and to participate to some extent in some form of creative activity, (9) to acquire the knowledge and attitudes basic to a satisfying family life, (10) to choose a socially useful and personally satisfying vocation that will permit one to use to the full his particular interests and abilities, and (11) to acquire and use the skills and habits involved in critical and constructive thinking.[8]

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[7]Platte Technical Community College, 1975-76 College Catalog. (Columbus, Nebraska: PTCC, 1975), p. 11.

[8]President's Commission on Higher Education, Higher Education for American Democracy (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), pp. 47-65.

George F. Zook in 1939 wrote "there is no battle in the educational world which is raging more furiously at the present time than that which revolves around the question of the character of general education at the junior college level."[9] The question of the character of general education, as well as the question of who in higher education is providing general education, remains in 1975.

There hasn't been much question that one of the major functions of the community college is to provide a program of general education. The document which was most influential in assigning certain purposes to the two-year college was the the previously cited 1947 Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education. The Commission listed the following functions: adult education, terminal (occupational) education, general education, and transfer work.[10] In 1950 Jesse P. Bogue summarized the functions of the community college as: guidance and counseling, general education, technical and vocational training, adult education, and university-parallel offerings.[11] The 1956 Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education listed four purposes: preparation for advanced study, vocational education, general education, and community services.[12]

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[9]George F. Zook, "General Education at the Junior College Level," Junior College Journal, IX (April, 1939), 353.

[10]President's Commission on Higher Education, op. cit., pp. 67-70.

[11]Jesse P. Bogue, The Community College (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), p. 76.

[12]Yearbook Committee, "The Role of the Public Junior College," The Public Junior College, Fifty-fifth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, ed. Nelson B. Henry (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 69.

Other publications concerned with the community college agree on the four to seven purposes of the two-year college. Whether or not the more specialized purposes such as guidance or developmental (remedial) education are mentioned, there is almost unanimous agreement on transfer, vocational, general, and community service functions as the major concerns of the community college. It appears that the community college clearly understands three of the four purposes, evidence being the various types of occupational programs that are offered, the variety of community service activities, and the preparation of students wishing to transfer to four-year colleges and universities. However, the same understanding does not seem to prevail in the fourth function--general education.

J. Derek Harrison listed a study in 1944 in which James W. Reynolds found that the junior colleges were "falling far short in the matter of providing an adequate general education program." He concluded that the divergence between theory and practice that has resulted in inadequate general education programs seemed to be a result of (1) a tendency to view the needs of transfer and terminal students as quite different, (2) the admissions requirements at four-year colleges and universities, and (3) a feeling that a comprehensive general education program could not be offered in only two years.[13]

B. Lamar Johnson in 1952 saw a need to aim general education programs and courses at more than just the students' intellects. He encouraged colleges to make general education courses and programs consistent with the philosophy of the college, to include required courses as well as recommended ones, and to supplement regular courses with other educational experiences.[14]

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[13] J. Derek Harrison, "General Education in the Community College: A Recent View," The Journal of General Education, XXV (July, 1973), 86.

[14] B. Lamar Johnson, General Education in Action (Washington: American Council on Education, 1952).

Leland L. Medsker in 1960 concluded that the data from his survey lead "to the conclusion that junior colleges have made relatively little progress in developing well-organized curricula for general education. Among factors responsible for this was the lack of a compelling conviction that an adequate program of general education requires a conscious and systematic effort...."[15]

James W. Thornton in 1966 concluded that the public junior colleges were not doing their job in general education. "Nevertheless, the fact remains that fewer than half of the colleges enforce any requirements beyond English, history, and physical education; and fewer than half organize any pattern of courses specifically for general education. The evidence is conclusive that the public junior colleges have not, in practice, accepted general education as one of their primary purposes."[16]

J. Derek Harrison suggests that "perhaps the easiest answer to the chronic failure of the general education function is simply to remove the function from community college consideration. Since we can scarcely argue that the transfer, occupational, and community service functions should be removed, it would be safest simply to ignore the fourth, troublesome function. Indeed, some community colleges have apparently set out on precisely that course."[17]

There is a lack of total agreement on what is and what ought to be included in general education. Community colleges have not done as well as they might, nor nearly as well as they should, with the function of general education. In very large part, the difficulties of general education in the community colleges have come from its sometimes valiant attempt to swim upstream against the dominant forces in American colleges and universities. There has been reluctance on the

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[15]Leland L. Medsker, The Junior College: Progress and Prospect (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), p. 63.

[16]James W. Thornton, The Community Junior College (New York: John Wiley, 1966), p. 209.

[17]Harrison, op. cit., p. 92.

part of four-year colleges and universities to accept general education credits. William Arrowsmith suggests that men of general intelligence are unavailable. He maintains that colleges and universities have failed as teaching institutions because they have been subverted from within; research has assumed more importance than teaching.[18] Professional and vocational programs have been structured as to permit little, if any, opportunity to take, much less encourage, student participation in general education.

Internally, community colleges have been too concerned with establishing an identity. In so doing, organizational structures such as the department based on disciplines, general education programs, and curricula, in general, were patterned on existing systems in the four-year colleges and universities. In most instances community colleges have only tinkered with change rather than put their full innovative interest and energies into meeting the demands of their students in general education. Community colleges have done an inadequate job in evaluating their general education programs. Attributing to this is a lack of a clear definition of, and clearly stated goals in, general education.

It is at this point that the writer wishes to state his position that the community college should NOT refrain from the function of general education. To be a comprehensive education unit the community college must not only retain the function of general education but also regain the confidence of the public in its ability to do so. It is a good thing that general education programs are criticized; this makes for healthy evaluation and promotes needed changes. Not all criticism, of course, is heeded; and probably less is acted upon. But the fact that it exists shows that educators are not content to readily accept a general education program which is inflexible and confining.

Community colleges must rise to the challenge and demonstrate the imaginative

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[17]William Arrowsmith, "The Future of Teaching, The Molding of Men," The Journal of Higher Education, XXXVIII (March, 1967), 136-41.

and innovative spirit that has been attributed to them. The patchwork tinkering with the general education curriculum will accomplish little, if anything, of significance; and only a fresh start will resolve constructive vitality. With state-supported community colleges placing increased significance on meeting the needs of all their residents, it is important that a comparable general education program is also provided.

Stanley O. Ikenberry did not list what should be included in future general education programs, but he did speculate on what should not be included: (1) Inflexible course requirements should not be included; (2) general education should not be a screening device; and (3) it should not place primary emphasis on the creation of an efficient production line to mass produce lower-division instruction so that savings can be reinvested in upper-division and graduate education.[19]

New organizational alternatives may need to be devised if general education is to be successful in the future. It is difficult to develop a strong general education program within the present structure of departments that are based on disciplines. Those disciplines and professions must decide whether they really wish a curricular monopoly and, if not, they must move to support a redefinition and revitalization of general education. As Paul Woodring so cogently comments, "No matter what the catalogue may say, no matter what the presidents and deans may announce, once a professor has walked into his classroom and closed the door, he teaches just about what and as he pleases."[20]

Many of the icebergs confronting general education in the community college are beginning to melt. A changing relationship between two- and four-year institutions appears to be in the making. As a result of changing attitudes and

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[19]Stanley O. Ikenberry, "The Academy and General Education," The Journal of General Education, XXIII (October, 1971), 183.

[20]Paul Woodring, The Higher Learning in America: A Reassessment (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 131.

declining enrollments, four-year institutions readily accept students and credits from the two-year colleges. Gerald B. Leighbody suggests that a high degree of specialization in the vocational subjects is not needed for successful placement; and it is the broadly prepared worker, not the narrowly trained specialists, who have the best chance for career and growth and occupational continuity. Further, he writes that there is no reason to believe that broadening the vocational curriculum will result in watering down or an abandoning of vocational outcomes as some vocationalists seem to fear. The idea that employers generally desire the schools to train students to perform the exact skills needed in particular jobs has never been borne out by actual experience. Leighbody asserts that all available evidence suggests that it is not necessary for occupational education to emphasize specialized work skills at the expense of general education in order to satisfy the expectations of employers. The most saleable skills are likely to be those which are non-specialized.[21]

In conclusion, the process of providing a general education is complex: an institution must have stated goals and be devoted to the task; instructors must be found who are able and willing to teach; and students must, as they put forth effort to learn, find that it is all relevant and worthwhile. Community colleges are tackling the problem in several ways, and students are responding in enthusiasm or disgust. The question isn't whether or not general education should be offered, but how and what should be provided in general education? The answer is not an easy one, nor is it limited to our time and our place. Acknowledging the success of the comprehensive community college in community services, transfer, and vocational education, they will find a way.

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[21]Gerald B. Leighbody, Vocational Education in American Schools (Chicago: American Technical Society, 1972), pp. 60-66.

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